



From Text Lingo to Textbook Learning

By Marcus Stallworth, LMSW

As an adjunct professor at a recognized private college in Connecticut, I recently taught a summer course called "Civility in Society." A colleague of mine, Anthony Gay, was teaching the same class, and we thought it would be a great idea to merge sections for the final group project. The assignment was simple: Students would create their own theoretical society. We allowed students to name the town, create laws and policies, and establish plans for economic and industrial sustainability. The results were shocking for two distinct reasons. First, students decided to name their capital city after a rap label that was popular at the time. Their entire infrastructure was predicated on the narcissistic ideology that each day would be based on indulgence, pleasure-seeking behaviors, and instant gratification. Workdays consisted of themes such as "Wasted Wednesdays" and "Thirsty Thursdays," with minimal emphasis on work ethic, family values, or consideration for nature or one's fellow citizens. The second observation was the volume of erroneous and misspelled words. It appeared that some students let the autocomplete function do the proofreading for them; some students actually included cell phone and texting abbreviations. After some candid conversation

About this, we quickly learned that many of our students' perceptions were based on the messaging and images they see each day through media. Kids are no longer learning adult concepts from their family members; rather, they are gaining experiences from external technology sources, with a disproportionate introduction to questionable material. Jokingly, we said, "Boy, do they need a dose of reality." Little did we know how true this statement would become. Being social workers by trade, we felt an obligation to educate and empower our students with resources and information. There was material available regarding video gaming and online predators, but there was limited information on the impact that media overexposure and lack of supervision has on behavior and the development of impressionable minds. Recognizing the weight of such an ambitious task, we reached out to three other social workers—Qur-an Webb, Dante Rabb, and Carlton White—who had a shared interest in this area. Soon, small focus groups turned into workshops, workshops turned into trainings, and trainings turned into seminars, which ultimately led to the creation of our company, Welcome 2 Reality, LLC (www.welcome2reality.us).

Welcome 2 Reality is a two-pronged entity that focuses on video production and educational development for adolescents and adults. Our target demographics are students, parents, social workers, and foster parents. We have an ongoing presence at the National Association of Social Workers, foster care entities, and child welfare conferences. We have developed a robust curriculum that explores topics such as television violence, cell phone addiction, internet safety, cyber-bullying, social media, music (lyrics), intentional marketing, and more.

This curriculum, "Mentoring through Media," is designed to bring participants back to a sense of reality; we accomplish this through facilitating group discussions, role-play exercises, and real-world scenarios. "Mentoring through Media" highlights the benefits that technology provides in terms of convenience and information-sharing, but also explores the potential risks faced by children—particularly those in foster care. The curriculum can be expanded or modified to meet the specific needs of the agency or organization with whom we consult. Based on our research, we have also developed a three-credit elective at the University of Bridgeport.

"Technology and the Human Services Professional" is geared toward educating young professionals who are contemplating the field of social work about how trauma and the innate desire to accumulate attachments relate to social media use. Welcome 2 Reality is heavily involved in the media literacy movement in Connecticut, as well. We played an active role in getting Senate Bill No. 962, Public Act No. 15-94—which mandates safe use of social media and computer instruction in the Connecticut public school curriculum—signed into law; this bill took effect in July.

The sheer amount of media currently available to young people is almost overwhelming. We strive to help youth understand this barrage; properly use its positive content; and lessen its negative impact on their behavior, psychological development, and lifestyle choices. Please visit our website, www.welcome2reality.us, explore the services we provide, find links to educational resources, access updates on the release of our curriculum, and learn about our upcoming documentary

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